

**ORPHISM AND THE LEGEND OF ORPHEUS
IN GERMAN LITERATURE OF THE
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY**

BY

MARK OLIVER KISTLER

A.B., Dickinson College, 1938

A.M., Columbia University, 1941

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

**SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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Just as the theme of Don Juan or Faust is representative of the Romantic mind, the symbol of Orpheus appears to disclose some fundamental tendencies of eighteenth century literature in Germany. Many philosophical writers, inquiring into the character of human thought and institutions, were accustomed to trace the creative activities of man to their beginnings and, where historical evidence failed them, were often satisfied with an imaginary picture of aboriginal times in which the arts, the state, and human civilization emerged from the darkness of savagery. Also poetry, creative literature in general, reflects this worship of originality. In literature no other symbol expressed more adequately the belief in ancient, god-inspired, and perfect Art than the figure of "Orpheus" for, as mythological tradition would have it, Orpheus was the founder of primeval poetry and a creator of civilization. Especially during the period of "original genius," from about 1770 to 1785, when the powers of natural genius unaffected by rational knowledge were exalted, did the Orpheus symbol enjoy striking popularity. It is this period which occupies most of the attention of the dissertation; for its historical development, the literary and philosophical references to the Orpheus theme prior to that time were investigated as well as later evidence which indicates that interest in this particular Greek subject seemed to cease around 1800.

In the course of this study it appeared advantageous to separate the subject into two main chapters, dealing with the figure of Orpheus and with the role of Orphism. Of the two the subject of Orphism held greater fascination for Sturm and Drang writers; however, the two concepts, "Orpheus" and "Orphism," were often interchanged and confused, so that it became necessary to examine both themes.

I. Ever since Hellenic times, through the Latin and the vernacular literatures of the Middle Ages, and continuing in the Renaissance and the Baroque periods, the figure of Orpheus was considered a symbol of artistic excellence and creativeness. For

two thousand years the legendary singer has been referred to consistently and with little apparent change, as the "creator of poetry" and the "bringer of culture."

However, this Orpheus myth appears to be composed of a great many themes and variations. Out of the variety of legendary accounts, we arrive at four leading themes which, sometimes separate, sometimes combined, proved fruitful to German poets of the eighteenth century. The most common theme is that of Orpheus, the god-inspired singer, the player of the lyre, who causes trees and rocks to weep, and who tames wild beasts. Another situation shows Orpheus, the tragic singer who, in search of his departed love, attempts to defeat death by descending to the netherworld. Closely related to this theme is that of Orpheus' death at the hands of the Bacchantic women and the strange tale of his singing head. Lastly, the motif of Orpheus as the founder of mysteries and the bringer of culture to primitive man, a kind of legendary, pre-Christian "Heiland," is often treated.

Of the four themes mentioned, that of Orpheus the singer is by far the most prevalent. In the later eighteenth century, poets like Voss, Klopstock, Herder, Lenz, Goethe, Wieland, and Maler Müller make numerous allusions to this gentle creative personality from Greek mythology. A quotation from Maler Müller's poem, *Orpheus-Klopstock*, may indicate the manner in which the Orpheus theme was employed. Since Klopstock is regarded here as a "new Orpheus," Müller illustrates poetic perfection by having the modern counterpart sing a song which casts a spell over Nature. Klopstock's artistry is said to wield such influence that

"Thal, Wald, und Anger staunten
Dem neuen Klang, die Ströme
Verweilten, horchend hingen
Die Felsen her zum Liede;
Es strebten auf die Quellen,
Und trunkne Steine sanken
Durch Nacht der Erde näher,
Gezogen von dem mächt'gen
Erhabnen Klang der Saiten."

To the writers of the Sturm and Drang period Orpheus the singer was a symbol of the artistic power of lyric poetry. Just as

MacPherson, Hamann, Herder, Lessing, and Goethe had seen in Ossian, Homer, Sophocles, or Shakespeare, an enlightened, god-inspired "nature," a "genius" at work, so did a vast number of poets and scholars regard Orpheus in a similar light. Indeed, the singer emerging from the mist of Greek myths and still surrounded with the mystery of divine origin, was a more universal and fitting symbol than the four famed poets just named. As a first "singer" among primitive human society, he was peculiarly adapted to the Sturm and Drang belief that a genius creates intuitively with Nature alone as a guiding power. The legend of Orpheus' miraculous poetic skill, the gentleness of his performance by which he could exert a magical and even demonic power, fitted ideally into the program of Sturm and Drang writers—even more than "Prometheus," who was often thought of as a symbol of the creative artist at this time. Whereas "Prometheus" occurs rather infrequently before the period of "original genius," the appearance of Orpheus can be observed in literature with certain regularity ever since the baroque age. In the "Genieperiode" itself, "Orpheus" was referred to more frequently and consistently to denote genius and artistic mastery than "Prometheus" or any other mythological figure. In this age in which the concept of the "Urmensch" occupied the thoughts and imaginations of many thinkers and poets, no other figure appears to have expressed more adequately the degree of perfection of which the human race was considered capable at the very beginning of its way toward civilization.

If Orpheus, the inventor of harmony and order, reflects the spirit of the time, so does Orpheus, the tragic singer, who descends to the underworld and attempts to regain his beloved through his song. The Orpheus-Eurydice theme offered a means of consolation for many of the pessimistically minded "Genies." Orpheus does lose Eurydice. But through the very loss Orpheus discovers the innermost essence of poetry and becomes the most heavenly of all poets. His complaint becomes a consolation, his song becomes a substitution for the physical loss of his love: Eurydice lives on in his song; his love and his music become identical; they transcend his existence and live on in the memories of mankind. Thus Orpheus symbolizes immortality, one of the loftiest ambitions of a poet during the eighteenth century.

The account of Orpheus and Eurydice is a possession of the

ages and is not limited to the eighteenth century. It occurs in the baroque age as well; the writings of Dach and Grimmelshausen may furnish casual examples. However, in the earlier part of the eighteenth century the popularity of this motif seems to increase; Gleim, Uz, and Zachariae treat the same theme. Gluck creates its classical and lasting version. But the Orpheus-Eurydice tale is most prevalent during the particular period of literature which concerns us mostly in this dissertation. Here the writings of J. G. Jacobi, Hölty, Klopstock, Maler Müller, Schiller, Friedrich Leopold and Christian Graf zu Stolberg, Voss, and Goethe must be taken into consideration. We can single out Schiller's *Der Triumph der Liebe* (1781) as illustrating the manner in which the nether-world story was employed in the latter part of the eighteenth century:

“Himmlich in die Hölle klangen
Und den wilden Hüter zwangen
Deine Lieder, Thrazier.
Minos, Tränen im Gesichte,
Mildete die Qualgerichte,
Zärtlich um Megärens Wangen
Küssten sich die wilden Schlangen,
Keine Geissel klatchte mehr;
Aufgeregt von Orpheus' Leier
Flog von Tityos der Geier;
Leiser hin am Ufer rauschten
Lethe und Cocytus, lauschten
Deinen Liedern, Thrazier!
Liebe sangst du, Thrazier!”

Obviously, the poet is seeking to contrast the theme of horror with that of the soothing effect of lyrical art. That the same poem celebrates the triumph of love over death (and over the element of the hideous) and thereby forgets the fact that Eurydice fails to return to the living, may illustrate the significance of Orpheus as a symbol of immortality.

It should be observed that the legend of Orpheus and Eurydice shows a close relation to other favorite themes of the eighteenth century, especially in regard to the idea of consolation and of sal-

vation. It differs from them through the emphasis on esthetic values, and through the attention which is given to the personality of the creative artist. For instance, in the dramas dealing with the Alceste and Iphigenie themes, the attainment of spiritual security is achieved not so much through an act of creative art, as it is through virtuous, moral, and humanitarian practices. The Orpheus theme contained possibilities which appealed to the esthetic requisites of those who believed that through artistic creativeness alone could man accomplish ultimate perfection.

We have noticed that a third feature which made the Orpheus theme interesting to the Sturm and Drang generation, that of Orpheus' death at the hands of the Bacchantic women and the survival of his singing head, was treated rather sparingly. The myth about the poet's demise is in itself a rather crude, unappealing theme. A severed head floating down a river does not connote a poetic picture. This feature of the ancient legend apparently did not fit into the general concept of Greek antiquity, that of beauty, goodness, and truth, which was embraced in the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, Jacobi's *Tod des Orpheus* treats the theme as illustrating the immortality of Art. Here, then, we have once more the glorification of an ultimate function of a poet.

However, a convincing case for poetry is presented in the symbol of Orpheus, the bringer of culture to primeval man, as far as the cultivating power of Art is concerned. As the first man of vision and ability to lead the untamed troglodyte into the realm of culture and civilization, and as the first to teach him the secrets of religious worship and devotion, Orpheus became symbolical for the "Künstler" who is able to exert the greatest civilizing influence on man: as the creator of form, order, or "Bildung." Already in the writings of Opitz and Moscherosch does this use of the Greek mythological figure make itself manifest. It is not until the Sturm and Drang period, though, that this symbol becomes widespread in the writings of Voss, Herder, Goethe, Friedrich Stolberg, and Klingler.

For instance, in Voss' poem, *Die Bundeseiche*, of 1772, we come across the passage that a poet is to wield a beneficent hand over his fellow man through the force of his example, just like another Orpheus:

“Durch Harmonien dann zähm’ er des Vaterlands
Anwachs, ein Orfeus, Lehrer der Frömmigkeit
Und Ordnung, unbiegsam dem Neid’
Und schamhaft!”

Reflecting similar ideas, F. M. Klinger would have writers remember their primary responsibility to humanity and not go too far in their enthusiasm. His voluminous novel, *Orpheus, eine tragisch-komische Geschichte* (1778-80), is a direct satire of the unrestrained writings of an untamed and self-centered genius.

In the “Genieperiode,” in which the poet assumed a divine role placing him above all other humans, “Orpheus” prefigured some of the concepts of esthetic humanism later developed in the classical age of German literature. We are reminded here of the ideas expressed in Herder’s *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele*, and later in Schiller’s *Über die aesthetische Erziehung des Menschen*, and in Goethe’s poem, *Vermächtnis*.

In conclusion of this chapter it may be observed that during the later eighteenth century the figure of Orpheus aroused peculiarly esthetic interest and that, therefore, a study of the various Orpheus themes is an investigation into the theory and practice of literary esthetics of this period.

II. The interest in Orphism likewise owed its impetus in the Sturm and Drang period to its esthetic appeal, although it is basically a religious concept. By Orphism we understand the religious mysteries of ancient Greece which were supposed to have been inaugurated by Orpheus. The scant knowledge of these mysteries reached posterity in a body of hymns which were supposed to have been chanted at the rites of these mysteries.

The interest in the “Orpheus” symbol in the “Genieperiode” was greatly enhanced by the peculiar attraction which these Orphic hymns had for the writers of this time. These hymns were regarded as manifestations of natural “Genie,” just as Ossian, Homer, or even the mere “folk” were considered in the writings of MacPherson, Percy, or Herder. In this connection we read in Herder’s *Älteste Urkunde des Menschengeschlechts* of 1774:

“Orphische Hymnen . . . sind nichts als zerstückte Glieder
des Urgesangs aller Wesen . . . Nachklänge barbarischer,

Thracischer, Griechischer Echo von den Geheimnissen Asiens und Ägyptens, von der ersten Urstiftung der Welt."

Goethe reflected similar ideas in his correspondence of this period.

Still the relation of Orphic hymns to the concept of genius is much more far-reaching. The hymns are imbued with a pantheistic spirit. They tell of an intensely active and dynamic nature, mysteriously endowed with organic life. Its parts are in perfect harmony with the whole. This concept of a divine and orderly universe became a model and inspiration for artistic activity for such men as Goethe and Herder. In this respect let us consider this quotation from the Goethe-Tobler *Fragment über die Natur*:

"Sie ist die einzige Künstlerin: aus dem simpelsten Stoffe zu den grössten Kontrasten; ohne Schein der Anstrengung zu der grössten Vollendung—zur genauesten Bestimmtheit, immer mit etwas Weichem überzogen. Jedes ihrer Werke hat ein eigenes Wesen, jede ihrer Erscheinungen den isoliertesten Begriff, und doch macht alles Eins aus . . . Ihr Schauspiel ist immer neu, weil sie immer neue Zuschauer schafft . . . Sie hat keine Sprache noch Rede; aber sie schafft Zungen und Herzen, durch die sie fühlt und spricht."

In the above passage is contained a good amount of the program of "original genius." Art must necessarily represent completeness, perfection, and unity. It must be creative, original, intuitive, and irrational.

The sources of this esthetic attitude toward Nature, and of the *Fragment über die Natur* in particular, have long been a subject of interesting controversy. Scholars like Wilhelm Dilthey, Oskar Walzel, and Conrad Weiser maintain that the pantheistic ideas of the young Goethe and Herder can be traced to Shaftesbury.

On the other hand, Ernst Beutler, Franz Schultz, and F. Dornseiff, argue that these same concepts can be traced to ancient Orphic hymns. In this dissertation it has been endeavored to prove that both schools of thought are correct; that is, that Shaftesbury, who without doubt exercised a great influence on the esthetic principles of the Genieperiode, himself derived his ideas regarding the contemplation of Nature from the Orphic hymns. To prove my point I have compared the ancient Orphic hymns to Nature

and to the Sun with prose hymns of similar subject matter found in Shaftesbury's *Moralists*, and have detected enough similarities to infer their direct relationship.

If Shaftesbury may have been responsible for creating a vital interest in Orphic literature in Germany, he was not the only source. In 1764 there appeared under the editorship of Matthias Gessner, a professor of poetry and eloquence at the University of Göttingen, a scholarly work, entitled *Orphei Argonautica Hymni Libellus de Lapidibus et Fragmenta*. As the title implies, the book contains, among other "Orphic" literature, the complete number of eighty-six hymns. Gessner, although not supplying the impetus, contributed with this publication vitally in the revival of the pantheistic theme.

With the entire set of Orphic hymns on hand, it was no longer the esthetic interest in pantheism which appealed to poets, but rather one of religious nature. The more the eighteenth century freed itself from orthodoxy and dogma, the more it could comprehend the spiritual essence of these Orphic hymns. To the Sturm and Drang poets and their contemporaries, the religion of pantheism was especially appealing. It showed man as closely related to Nature, to the universe, and to the divine. If man possessed a god-like quality within himself, he was possibly on an equal plane with God—a concept which was certainly tempting to the believers in "original genius."

Besides Herder and Goethe, there were others who evidenced an interest in the religious nature of Orphic literature. In 1784, forty-nine Orphic hymns translated into German by Georg Christoph Tobler, appeared in the *Schweitzerisches Museum* in Zürich. It is obvious that Tobler, who had a pastorate and intended to keep it, is a bit fearful as to how these hymns will be received. Though adopting a cautious, apologetic tone, he suggests that these hymns contain a pantheistic religion which could rejuvenate the present Christian dogma and which *per se* might appeal to the spiritual desires of contemporary humanity.

With the translations of Tobler as a pattern, several other adaptations of Orphic hymns in German followed. In the edition of *Gedichte* of Ludwig Theobul Kosegarten (1788), there appear a "Hymne an die Natur," a "Hymne an den Mond," and a "Hymne an

den Schlaf." All three have appended to the title, "Nach Orpheus."

Kosegarten, who had translated Scottish, Swedish, and Danish folksongs, not only saw in these ancient hymns evidence of primeval song, but he was likewise attracted by their religious implications. As a student of theology at Greifswald, and later as a minister in Riga, he was concerned about the pantheistic sentiment in this ancient literature. Furthermore, he had leanings toward the mystical theology of Meister Eckhart, Tauler, Böhme, and Valentin Weigel, from whom the step to Orphic pantheism would not be very far.

The next writer to be attracted to the Orphic hymns was Valerius Wilhelm Neubeck. His *Hymnus an Nemesis* (1792) borrows heavily in its content from the ancient source. The religious quality of the ancient prototype, however, is converted into narrow didacticism at the expense of poetic, esthetic quality.

Finally, Karl Ludwig von Knebel employed the Orphic hymns as a foil for his own poetic writings, but he poetized and enlarged their content in keeping with the tastes of his time. In works like *Hymnus an die Natur*, *Hymnus an die Sonne*, *Hymnus an Selene*, and *Hymnus an die Erde* (1803-10), his reverence toward Nature in all its manifestations approaches that of subjective, sentimental devotion. Knebel's passive sentimentalism separates him at once from the active temper of the "Genieperiode," so that his interest in Orphism appears to be the product of merely "literary" rather than of genuine nature. Orphism and sentimentalism combined—as is the case in Knebel's Orphic poems—produce a rather artificial effect.

The literary interest in the hymns also stimulated curiosity in the Orphic mysteries themselves. Both Wieland and Heinse make numerous references to these Orphic cults of Greek antiquity.

Wieland introduces Orphic mysteries as one stage in the educational development of the main characters of his novels. In contrast to eighteenth century lyrics where the Orphic ideal was viewed as a symbol of perfection, the novel of the time considers Orphism as just one world view among others, and not even as the highest. *Agathon* may serve as an example. Here the hero is initiated at an early age into the Orphic mysteries, but ultimately rejects their principles and philosophy. Wieland does not pretend to write historical novels, but novels which permit pertinent appli-

cation to his own age. Therefore, these mysteries scarcely reflect ancient Greek cults, but rather the mystical and pantheistic tendencies of the eighteenth century against which Wieland raises a cautioning voice. When he satirizes the Orphics and their orgiastic ceremonies, he is pointing at the extreme sentimental and Pietistic currents in his own day.

Orphism takes on a slightly different aspect in two of Wieland's later novels, *Agathodämon* and *Aristipp*. Although disillusioned and critical about the mysteries, both *Agathodämon* and *Aristipp* embrace Orphic pantheism as their personal choice. To them Orphic pantheism becomes an artist's philosophy; it has unique value only for him who believes in esthetic values. It is an inspiring force, the core of his convictions and his creativeness; but it is fraud if raised to the status of a general creed, applicable to all. After all, even following Nature, an artist is dealing with the world of phenomena, with "Schein."

Wieland's interest in secret sects and cults had a positive effect on one of his disciples, Jakob Wilhelm Heinse. In his *Ardinghello*, the artistic implications of Orphic pantheism appear quite similar to those observed in *Agathodämon* and *Aristipp*. However, in Heinse's *Laidion*, the erotic nature of the mysteries predominates, and Orphism plays merely the role of an external, decorative ornament.

It should be observed that the Orphic mysteries as depicted by Wieland and Heinse are subterranean cults of a Dionysiac character. As such, they are in direct contrast to the Apollinic nature of Greek antiquity as described by Winckelmann. The Dionysiac element in the eighteenth century has as yet received little attention and the above observations might well be a starting point for an investigation of this subject.

Although this study of Orpheus and Orphism was originally intended to be carried as far as the year 1800, this boundary has been crossed by including hymns of Knebel's, written in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Their close relation to the subject of this investigation warrants their inclusion.

Finally, also Goethe's *Urworte Orphisch*, written in 1817, has been included. This poem represents, as it were, a crystallization and clarification of the Orphic theme as we traced it in the eighteenth

century. In these stanza's Herder's romantic conception of Orphic writings as manifestations of primeval "Genie" has given way to a symbolical interpretation: this ancient literature is significant, not because it is prehistoric and original, but because it symbolizes eternal human truths discovered in early times and still valid. The pantheistic conception of a divinely permeated and regulated universe has been retained by Goethe, although it now has primarily religious, and only secondarily artistic implications. As concerns the mysteries, they are no longer thought of as a secret cult, but rather as a sacred world order, implanted in the individual and devoted to the pursuit of an active and moral life, to the contemplation of an ordered and integrated cosmos, and to faith in a definite eschatology.

The religious implications of the "Urworte" are all the more reminiscent of eighteenth century Orphism. It becomes obvious that, whereas the Orpheus symbol is primarily concerned with esthetic problems, Orphism in the period under investigation is fundamentally a subject of religious import. Nevertheless, both "Orphism" and "Orpheus" have a common point of contact in that both are vitally connected with the world view of the "Geniemenschen."

The subject of this dissertation could easily be continued into the nineteenth century—especially into the Romantic period. Pertinent references could be found in the writings of Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, and Hölderlin. But after the first two decades the "Orphic" theme fades away with the decreasing interest in metaphysical problems in German literature until it bursts into bloom again in the twentieth century. Rilke's *Sonnette an Orpheus* are exemplary of this renewed interest.

VITA

Mark O. Kistler was born April 21, 1918, in New Tripoli, Pennsylvania. He attended the local grade schools and the Slatington High School, where he graduated in 1934. From 1934 to 1938 he studied at Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and received the degree of Bachelor of Arts with high honors in 1938. He was then awarded an exchange scholarship by the Institute of International Education which enabled him to study at the University of Frankfurt am Main, Germany, during the school year 1938-1939. He entered Columbia University in 1939 and received his Master of Arts degree in German in 1941. He spent the academic years 1943-1944 and 1946-1948 at the University of Illinois as a graduate student in German.

From April 1942 until September 1943, and again from September 1944 until September 1946, he was an instructor of German at Dickinson College. During the three years that he studied at the University of Illinois he taught as a part-time assistant in the Department of German.

